

SANSKRIT DRAMA EPIC AND ROMANCE

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It may plausibly be held that a review of Sanskrit drama in relation to the familiar conceptions of epic and romance has for a considerable time been overdue. Although almost all the noteworthy plays are obviously seen to advantage, both from viewpoints of comparison and contrast, against the background of the earlier masterpieces of Sanskrit literature, they have rarely been so considered in a systematic manner. Nevertheless, from the earlier poetry the drama emerged and into a decadent poetry it at last returned. It is true that most scholarly editors of the plays with episodes clearly derived from the narrative poems, have offered some comments on the indebtedness of the dramatists to their sources or their departures from them. But remarkably few general conclusions have been reached.

A partial explanation of this critical default lies in the relatively belated discovery of the manuscripts of thirteen plays now described as "The Trivandrum Plays" and, chiefly for convenience' sake, ascribed to the dramatist Bhasa. With only four exceptions, these are directly based on either the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*. Unknown to scholars until early in the present century, they obviously contributed nothing to the descriptions of Sanskrit drama for over a century after this literature became known to the West. They were, of course, lost also to India itself. Seven of the plays derive their materials exclusively from the *Mahabharata*, two from the *Ramayana* and all show at least some influence from these most celebrated of Sanskrit poems. The nine plays chiefly in question are *The Five Nights*, *Potsherd as Envoy*, *The Embassy*, *Karna's Task*, *The Broken Thighs*, *The Middle One*, and *The Adventures of the Boy Krishna*, all deriving their principal characters and situations from the *Mahabharata*, and *The Coronation* and *The Statue Play*, derived chiefly from the *Ramayana*. These

are not only in thought but in style decidedly different from the mainstream of Sanskrit drama and closer to the earlier poetry. Also, though without conclusive evidence, scholars are unanimous in holding that all the Bhasa plays belong to an earlier period in Sanskrit drama than do the masterpieces by which this dramatic literature is still chiefly known. Though all dates are conjectural, this view is distinctly plausible. Considered in terms of spirit and poetic style, the evolution is well indicated by the difference between the peculiarly forthright manner of the Bhasa play, *Charudatta in Poverty*, and the singularly rich texture of its successor, Sudraka's *Little Clay Cart*.

In presenting the view expressed here there is small temptation to repeat any of the well-known definitions of epic or romance or even to formulate new definitions with the intention implied in all definition, generalisation. Only two narrative poems need be considered, though these, to be sure, comprehend in themselves a very considerable body of highly diversified literature and may virtually be regarded as compilations. They are many times longer than all the works at any time ascribed to Homer, their content consisting of myths, legends and exhortations. Nevertheless, for preliminary purposes a few general statements are called for.

By an epic is understood a narrative work accepted by an entire people as a major imaginative composition, marked by violent and heroic action, rich in mythological imagery and in expression of ideals accepted as dominant in the culture of its origin. It is commonly described as an accumulation of poetic tradition, even where a divine or half-legendary author is assumed. It is a literature of belief rather than of entertainment. Many works share in a few of these distinctions, yet in other qualities are marked by important departures and hence preferably termed romances. In such cases a less masculine and a more feminine consciousness prevails. Idealism in the moral or ethical sense gives way to sentiment, grandeur to pathos. The militant spirit is on the whole overshadowed by the erotic. Epic poetry has in general the gravity of hymnology; romantic poetry, the glow or warmth of fiction. The epic poet, in short, assumes belief both in the validity of his mythology and the historicity of his narrative whereas the romantic poet is relatively content to move the heart.

It is further customary to speak of an "epic age" as well as of epic poetry. One begets the other. An epic age is characterized by austerity and severity. Romantic poetry, on the contrary, derives from a later and softer culture, a feudal period attended by a marked degree of elegance, refinement and sophistication. This is not to deny keen intelligence and vigorous thought to an epic period but only to deny such a period the luxury of romantic sensibility.

These distinctions have, doubtless, some general force and broad application but are even peculiarly applicable to Indian literature. Some confusion has arisen from the popular and unqualified description of the older *Mahabharata* and the younger *Ramayana* as alike epics. No one truly familiar with them will question that in terms of the foregoing description the older poem is essentially and indubitably epic, the younger on the whole better described as romantic. Like Vedic literature, many of whose qualities it shares, the former was, incidentally, accepted as of divine origin, the latter described as dictated by the gods to Valmiki. Thus a human author is at least named. A long step had been taken in the direction of romance, even though all readers will admit that in the *Ramayana* the epic background remains visible. One poem in its austerity suggests the Himalayas, the other, a fertile plain lying at the mountains' foot. Or better, one suggests the north of India, the other, the south.

It should be clear that the so-called "Bhasa" plays stand closer to the epic tradition than do the works of those playwrights too long described as the unrivalled masters of Sanskrit drama, as, notably, Kalidasa, Harsha, Sudraka and Bhavabhuti. It would be better said that as time advanced the heroic and epic elements tended to diminish, the pathetic and courtly elements to increase. It is scarcely too much to say that the scene of one group of plays is laid in a "fair field full of folk," that of the other in a singularly elegant princely harem.

Obviously, in any consideration of an art, spirit or style is more important than subject-matter. The Bhasa plays contain a remarkable drama long considered the finest in the collection, *The Vision of Vasavadatta*, a work in the erotic and subjective moods. But its style is much closer to the epic than is Kalidasa's. It clearly represents an earlier phase in Sanskrit drama than any of Kalidasa's three plays preserved to us. It may be admitted that occasionally a later playwright, strongly influenced by his epic sources, may at least approach the epic style, as Bhata Narayana in his *Venisamhara*. More often a late playwright when treating a romantic subject, as Bhavabhuti in his *Uttararamacharita*, will far outdo the *Ramayana* itself in what is commonly regarded as the romantic style and spirit.

Of course the nominal prestige of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* has scarcely diminished in India through the centuries. But attitudes toward both have unquestionably changed. It is no surprise, then, that the so-called Bhasa plays were allowed to pass into obscurity while later and far more romantic works won their well deserved fame. Here the reception of Indian classical drama by the West is likewise significant. This literature became known for the first time at the very height of the romantic period. Goethe, as often observed, praised *Sakuntala* with words almost as romantic as the play itself. The warm Indian playwrights were ideally qualified to please the Western romantics. In the general terms in

which romanticism is described it may be doubted if any poet has been more romantic than Bhavabhuti; one may even go so far as to declare that no scene in drama surpasses in this regard the third act of his masterpiece, the *Uttaramacharita*, unless it be the celebrated fourth act of *Sakuntala*. Here lay the highly gratifying image of the ancient Indian drama as this was understandably reflected for well over a century in Western criticism.

The West and even India itself have been slow to adjust themselves to the new outlook so much encouraged by the discovery of the Bhasa plays. On rare occasions honest and enterprising Indian scholars have actually expressed a preference for the Bhasa plays, but this view has remained very much the exception. Accordingly, at the present juncture it seems timely to re-examine the entire field from the standpoint of drama in relation to epic and romance, where quite possibly the most fruitful clues for interpretation lie.

The viewpoint of comparative literature affords helpful analogies and suggestions. It is clear, for example, that Greek drama grew out of epic poetry in particular and poetry inspired by the epic spirit in general. It also step by step progressed in the direction of romance. Dramatic literature being everywhere, a later development than the other important forms of poetry, at no time does the Greek drama now known to us and deriving from the period of Athenian supremacy conform strictly to the epic manner. No important dramatic literature is, indeed, known anywhere to have flourished in an epic age. But in its earliest known stages, that is, in the early works of Aeschylus, Greek drama does come remarkably close to the epic, as such early works of Aeschylus as *The Persians* and *The Seven Against Thebes* witness. Sophocles is still heroic but represents a riper phase of Greek humanism. He is less impetuous and heroic than the great master who, as his apologists cogently remind us, fought at Salamis. Euripides, their successor, the master of pathos, is far advanced on the road-way to romanticism. Aeschylus, in short, stands close to the heroic poet, Pindar, Euripides to the romantic poet, Callimachus. Clearly, this pattern of development in Greece parallels and elucidates that in India.

Moreover, the essentials of a dramatic as distinguished from a non-dramatic style appear, of course, in each literature while the divergent claims of epic and stage became conspicuous. A presentational art demands a stricter economy than a purely recitational art. The *Mahabharata*, considerably older than the *Iliad*, is much more leisurely in its style and vastly more expansive than the remarkably succinct Bhasa plays. Similarly, Aeschylus is more condensed than Homer. The Greek drama assimilated the lyric style, the odes in Aeschylus approximating those of Pindar, much as the Sanskrit drama gradually assimilated the modes of lyric poetry, although this, being embryonic in the Bhasa plays, is of relatively little consequence. Even the Greek style in narrative verse tended to yield bit

by bit to the romantic, as well-known through the contrasting moods of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Breathtaking dramatic gestures occur in the *Mahabharata* but perhaps no book so clearly defies the theatrical spirit as the Sanskrit epic by indulging in its amazing elaborations, leisurely expansions and monumental digressions. To the poet of this epic, time, it seems, signified nothing but to the successful dramatist, even in ancient India, time perforce means everything. Drama is tension. An audience leaves when the excitement wanes. A Bhasa play and the great primal epic in India are, as it were, the face of a single clock where the epic is the hour hand, the play, the second hand.

The poignant irony, the paradoxical conjunction of idealism and pessimism, that everywhere mark the epic spirit, invigorate the Bhasa plays, as they do those of Aeschylus. It is noteworthy that the Indian playwright owes much more to the *Mahabharata* than to the *Ramayana* and that even his two plays leaning chiefly on the *Ramayana* are cast more in the mold of the earlier than of the later poem. The pungent moral casuistry so typical of the pure epic is everywhere conspicuous in the Bhasa plays. Perhaps it may be said that only a close inspection of such plays as *The Five Days*, *The Embassy* and *Karna's Task* reveals the intensity of the ironic moods. There is an austerity here quite lacking in the masterpieces of Kalidasa or Bhavabhuti. *The Later History of Rama* is indeed, the very last word in pathos not only because of its perfervid emotionalism but because of the purity of its sentiment, where tenderness rises to its apex without suspicion of sentimentality. A Westerner, nursed in a pure classicism, may well find its scenes cloying but will hardly question their sincerity.

Few persons will, we trust, care to dispute the long-established eminence and high splendor of the obviously mature Sanskrit drama as represented by Kalidasa, Sudraka and Bhavabhuti. But a few more words must be said here on the much less understood though no less approachable Bhasa plays and especially of those based on the purest epic tradition. Quality, which should always take precedence over quantity, must be evoked. *The Middle One* is clearly a casual study in the grotesque, with much humor in the burly, anti-heroic manner represented in the considerable number of humorous scenes in the *Mahabharata* and in such mock-epics as the early Greek *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, long attributed to Homer himself. At least we know from the "Battle of the Gods" in the *Iliad* what great talent the robust, early Greeks themselves possessed for laughing at their own gods and heroes. The chief serious plays relevant here are, as already observed, but five in number, each brief and only one extending to more than a single scene. We are reminded of the old fables of the elephant and the fly: nothing more diffuse than the colossal and (at present, it must be confessed) often fatiguing *Mahabharata*, nothing more succinct than these capsule epics for the Indian stage. The final interview between the

divine Krishna and the blind king of the Kurus in *The Embassy* is, I think, one of the most completely surprising, deeply moving and adroitly conceived episodes known to me in drama. But it is only an instance. The massive power of *The Broken Thighs* has at least been occasionally confessed. Surely, the last-mentioned work refutes the familiar remark, repeated by the most widely read historian in English of the Sanskrit drama, A. B. Keith, that the Indians lack the sense of tragedy! Or perhaps we may hold that epics attain purer tragedy than the stage? What scene in Aeschylus or Sophocles, for example, in this respect surpasses the last book of the *Iliad* or, for that matter, the final episode in the *Niebelungenlied*? What image in tragic irony surpasses that of the horses of Achilles with drooping heads weeping for the follies of mankind? (O for only one of those horses to comment on American Asian or astral policy!)

Similar moments of tragic grandeur and emotion are actually common in these five Bhasa plays, especially in passages dealing with the young and ill-fated hero, Abhimanyu. I have myself attempted to indicate the concerted force of these brief but momentous plays by recalling that several such were undoubtedly presented, like Noh dramas, in sequence on single occasions and thus in my translations in *Sanskrit Plays from Epic Sources* recognized their obvious arrangement as scenes or acts in a single drama. When these works are considered as such, it may well be thought that not even the incomparable richness of the masterpieces of Kalidasa, Sudraka or Bhavabhuti surpasses in final estimation the epic severity of the Bhasa work. No strict categorical evaluation is here implied. Quite the contrary, the only claim made here is that in such matters any preference that is more than personal must be pedantic, just as in final analysis a critic would be equally rash and foolish to rate either of the so-called Indian epics above the other. The argument is not that we should esteem Kalidasa less (he can never be overpraised) but that we should esteem Bhasa more and re-interpret his accomplishment. All that is contended is that all the plays alluded to in these pages are masterful to a high degree, the larger and better-known group best understood as expressing the warm spirit of romance, the smaller group, both numerically and physically, as expressing the austere spirit of epic poetry.

Although a romantic strain seems inevitable in modern man, a romantic age now lies behind us. We live in an epic age, unhappily as yet powerless to produce an epic. Let us not forget one of the great episodes in Sanskrit drama nor the words of Queen Gandhari designating the conflicts of heroes as "fratricidal wars." Such thought and art gather force through the centuries.